



The Agony Of Bushwick

There have been many reports, stories and news articles on the problems of Bushwick. This series is being compiled by Carl E. Clemens, James J. Kelly, and Maureen Walthers in an endeavor to examine the causes of, and attempt to find solutions to, the present situation. The raw material for the articles is drawn from the files of the Ridgewood Times, which has served Bushwick and its neighboring communities for more than seventy years.

Bushwick entered the decade of the 1950's as a pleasant, predominately Italian community. Civic groups such as the 28th Ward Taxpayers Association, organized in 1895 and bearing the motto, "Taxpayers By Banding Together Can Accomplish Wonders — Individually They Count For Little," were a driving force in the community. Out of this organization came the Congressmen, Assemblymen, City Councilmen and District Leaders of the neighborhood.

Eugene Keogh, Retired U.S. Congressman and Joseph Corso, Dominick Corso, and Thomas J. Mirabile, all Judges now, were members. It is also interesting to note that Jared Chambers, who was one of the founders of this organization, waged a battle in the early part of the century to have Brooklyn declared a separate city, and not become part of New York City. Had he won, Brooklyn today would be the fourth largest city in the country, and one can only wonder if things would have turned out differently.

Italian Societies were active in the area. Religiously oriented, they nonetheless exercised civic and political influence. Many, like the Knights of Columbus, Societa Polizzi Generosa, Knights of Trapani provided a stabilizing influence in the predominately Italian northern section of Bushwick. Last year many of these clubs formed a

coalition under the banner of the Federazione Italo-Americana of Greater New York. Despite the influx of new Italian immigrants after 1965, and the fact that these clubs still remain based in Bushwick, the overall decline of Bushwick was not slowed.

However, in the mid-50's, the movement out of the neighborhood had not yet reached dramatic proportions. The welfare population was growing slowly; as it made its inroads, the white middle-class exodus continued, eroding the basic foundation of the neighborhood. A changing population, without roots in the community, emerged. The welfare recipient didn't have enough will, means, or political clout within the community, and apathy began creeping in. It was a case of civic suicide, with apathy and helplessness applied in small but

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deadly doses.

One of the most reliable barometers of neighborhood decay is the educational quality of the public schools. As local reading scores go down, the neighborhood declines.

Bushwick is a classic example of this process at work. Bushwick's schools rank third lowest in the city, according to the latest Board of Education reading scores. Only Brownsville and the lower East Side (District 1) are worse; but it wasn't always so. In the 1940s and 50's the Bushwick Elementary schools were among the better schools in the city. Bushwick High school was respected for its academic excellence and scholarship.

At this time, the Board of Education was discarding the traditional methods of teaching and beginning experiments with the new "progressive educational system."

In 1954, the Supreme Court's momentous Brown decision exploded on the educational scene. Justice Earl Warren's dictum that "equal education requires integration of the races" caused a ripple effect within white middle class neighborhoods, which continues to plague the school system and neighborhoods today. "Busing" was the medium used by the Board of Education to foster integration, and Ridgewood was the first target area for implementation of its integration plans.

In a deliberate but mysterious move, children from Bedford-Syuyvesant were bused to Ridgewood, bypassing Bushwick on the way, even though under-utilized seats were available there. The Ridgewood schools were also under-utilized, but the parents and taxpayers of Ridgewood reacted to busing by organizing massive protests. They fought to maintain the neighborhood school concept, and were successful in scaling down the Board's busing plans. Many parents in Ridgewood abandoned the public schools, and either sent their children to parochial schools or moved out of the city altogether.

Strangely enough, as those

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young muggers who make the streets unsafe. Not as easily fingered are the outside forces political, real estate, and governmental — that helped grease the slide for Bushwick. Predatory real estate operators grew fat on Bushwick's decline and did all they could to accelerate it. Blockbusting became Bushwick's biggest business in the early sixties.

In the late sixties the federal government made its contribution through the scandal-ridden FHA program. The City of New York, through its welfare system, its housing and planning agencies, was also culpable. It is impossible to point to any of these factors as the sole or pre-eminent cause of Bushwick's deterioration; we can safely say that it was induced by the interplay of human greed and official mismanagement.

In subsequent articles we will deal with the various aspects that contributed to the devastation of Bushwick.

did not complete its program of school construction until the 1970's. By this time the school population was already declining, as a consequence, there are many empty classrooms in the new schools which have opened in the last two years.

Decentralization was supposed to answer some of the problems, but we cannot say that it has improved the educational process. In Bushwick's Community School District #32, the local Community School Board is embroiled in controversy about federal contracts, favoritism and bilingual education. The Board of Education is presently conducting an investigation into reported conflicts of interest between local board members and companies that have done business with the Board.

Who is responsible for the deterioration in Bushwick? It is easy to point out the looters on Broadway, the welfare recipients who cheat on the system, the

As the ethnic balance in the public schools kept shifting, the parochial schools in Bushwick experienced a changing ethnic balance which reflected the state of the community.

In 1950 Bushwick's elementary schools were 100% white. By 1960, the figures reflected the ethnic shift in the community: white students were 47% of the total, Black students 30%, and Puerto Rican students 23%. By 1968 the white student population had decreased to 19% of the total; Blacks represented 38%, and 43% were Puerto Rican. Community School District #32, which included all the public schools in Bushwick, has a current enrollment of students that is 60% Spanish, 30% Black, and 10% Other. The 10% "others" in the most recent figures are presumably Italian and other non-Puerto Rican whites.

The population of Bushwick continued to increase dramatically in the late 50's and early 1960's and the number of persons on welfare soared to almost 40% of Bushwick's total population. Crime and juvenile delinquency increased sharply. A new era of sophistication was emerging within the Welfare system. As welfare services became more and more accepted, even welcomed by other agencies who fed off the profits, welfare recipients became more cognizant of their civil rights, and the Welfare Rights Movement was organized. Demands were being made, and acquiescence to demands became the order of the day for the City of New York.

However, with the Bushwick school enrollment increase in the 1960's and the elementary schools becoming dramatically over-

middle-class residents moved from Ridgewood and adjoining communities, the white middle-class from Buswick filled the vacant apartments. The decline of public education was exacerbated by the introduction in 1958 of junior high schools, an experiment that-by all accounts—has been an educational flop.

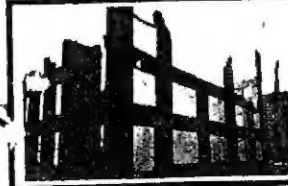
Parents disillusioned with the public school educational system enrolled their children in private and parochial schools, where traditional teaching methods were still being employed.

Not realizing the social significance of the sudden thrust of enrollment, the Diocese of Brooklyn, through its parishes, embarked on an expansion program.

Parochial schools in Bushwick found themselves with an overflowing school population. Additions to schools were built in many cases to accommodate the increase. Nor was Bushwick alone in the escalation of enrollments in the private and parochial school system; it had significant impact throughout the whole city.

The Catholic schools prospered for awhile, but were forced to cut back in the seventies because of skyrocketing costs and the decline in religious teaching staff. The dramatic decline in parochial enrollment has resulted in either the merging or closing of almost the entire parochial school system in Bushwick today.

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Due to the massive social changes of the past 15 years, Bushwick is suffering from what sociologists would identify as institutional dislocation. There has been a reversal of the area's ethnic and racial composition, an escalating crime rate, widespread housing abandonment, deterioration in educational achievement, soaring unemployment rates, and the panoply of ills attendant on the problem of concentrated poverty.

Many of the institutions, particularly those of a private nature, established by former residents and linked effectively to their lives, no longer exist. The exodus of business firms and solid middle-class residents has caused public agencies to be overburdened, and unable to cope with the social problems which they were designed to address. In this article we will attempt to analyze the effects of institutional dislocation and its contribution to Bushwick's

severest problem — the housing question.

An inventory of the housing stock in Bushwick shows that there are over 1,000 abandoned buildings, 500 vacant lots, and 850 unsafe buildings. The abandonment of six-family brick buildings that are realizing big incomes from welfare rents must be puzzling to the uninitiated. However, abandonment can be a lucrative option for the speculator who has milked a building for years. In rare instances, abandonment is the only solution for the decent landlord who cannot collect rents and whose property has been destroyed by undesirable tenants.

In the typical speculator-slumlord operation, the six-family or larger apartment house becomes

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a liability only when, through neglect, it is declared unfit for human occupancy by the City. Before this point is reached, the building has been yielding inflated welfare rents, with no repairs made, and no taxes paid for at least two years. In this fashion the owner maximizes his profit for a period prior to abandonment. The Welfare Department begins to move the tenants out as the building becomes uninhabitable. As the tax arrears begin to approach the two-year limit, the landlord is brought into housing court. Torching the building for the insurance money squeezes the last pennies out of the property.

While the six-family house or larger building is the speculator's favored investment, there was also lots of money to be made on the two-family (illegal 3) wood frame houses in Bushwick.

Racial change was not orderly or natural. It was precipitated by racial fears, exploitation and panic. The white working class was not, generally speaking, replaced by the minority working class. The first new families on the block usually in the six-family houses, were invariably welfare recipients. The owners of the two-family houses panicked, and scrambled to get out. Even the working class minority could not afford to purchase these houses because conventional mortgages were not available.

No bank, it is believed, has given mortgages to anyone in Bushwick since the mid-sixties. This practice, called redlining, is one of the causes of neighborhood decay. Financial institutions contend that it is not fair to cloak them with this mantle; they quite rightly claim that they are obliged to make careful investments of their patrons' money. What would be the decision of their depositors if they were asked to invest directly in these areas? Who can say that Bushwick is a prime location for the cautious investor; but what about Ridgewood?

When working class Blacks and Puerto Ricans did want to purchase a home, they were forced

to go to FHA for help. They were victimized and cheated by the real estate brokers who arranged the mortgage insurance with the FHA in Hempstead.

The broker then, after frightening away the white homeowners by playing on their racial fears, purchased their homes at knockdown prices. A house worth \$10,000 was bought up for \$5,000 cash. The broker then arranged a sale with a Black or Puerto Rican family for \$20,000. He arranged mortgage insurance with FHA for the \$20,000 by bribing the inspectors who would appraise the property at the inflated rate. He assured the eligibility of the applicant by inflating his income on the FHA documents. This too was arranged with the connivance of FHA officials. Banks and mortgage companies had nothing to lose on this type of deal — their monies were guaranteed by the government who provided the mortgage insurance. Only the would-be homeowner and the owner who fled lost out on this deal. The banks, mortgage companies and the brokers got their money.

The new homeowner usually could not meet his payments for very long — his income had been exaggerated — the house fell apart — and finally, unable to meet his repayment and maintenance costs, he simply moved out. The government became the owner of another abandoned dwelling in Bushwick. Sometimes a building was recycled through the process, but usually it was simply allowed to deteriorate before being foreclosed by FHA.

Although the FHA scandal was finally exposed and a number of officials indicted — operating with the public's tax moneys — the government is still the owner of more than 400 abandoned buildings in Bushwick. An untold number of vacant lots, where FHA insured homes once stood, are also in government hands.

The U.S. Government is Bushwick's biggest slumlord. Would the result have been different if the banks had supplied the money? Why were no safeguards taken by FHA to prevent the crooked deals that were to burn Bushwick in later years? What was the City of New York's contribution?

New York City's role in the decline of the housing in Bushwick has been equally pernicious. In 1968 the City demolished two square blocks of sound brick

housing in Bushwick's CORE area — next to St. Barbara's Church. More than 200 tenants were relocated with assurances from the City Fathers that they would have first call on the new apartments that would be constructed on the site of their demolished homes. A decade later, not a sod has been turned

on the P60 site, as the levelled area is known.

New York City has led the way in razing whole blocks of Bushwick — bleak testimony to its commitment to urban renewal. As abandonment of FHA insured homes increased geometrically, the City began to take over tax-delinquent buildings through its "in rem" process. As abandoned structures became unsafe, they were slated for demolition, but usually only the better brick buildings were actually demolished. The old wooden frame structures, although admittedly more hazardous, were left standing because they were not as profitable to the demolition companies. They got more for demolishing solid brick structures.

The vandals usually took care of the wood frame houses. They stripped them of all movable fixtures — gutters, pipes, plumbing, boilers, burners, cables — before setting them aflame. There is a ready market for the brass, copper, lead and other scrap removed from the abandoned buildings. When all the marketable material was safely out of the building, it was systematically torched.

Arson only became fashionable in Bushwick in the late sixties and early seventies. It made its debut in Bushwick as the Welfare tenants' passport to better accommodations.

The Department of Social Services relocated the tenant, paid his/her moving expenses, and gave an allowance for new furniture when the tenant was burned out. Otherwise it was virtually impossible to garner these benefits. Naturally, this flawed system led to an escalation of abuses.

A case study of one Bushwick family conducted by the State Comptroller's Office, and released last July, shows that the family has been burned out 13 times in the last 7 years. The profile reveals that this family of six has received a total of \$10,000 in disaster assistance, relocation,

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and furniture allowances. Four of the fires occurred after the furniture was removed from the apartment. All of the fires were labeled as suspicious and considered deliberately set, according to the Fire Department. The Comptroller's report criticized the Department of Social Services and its parent agency, HRA, for their negligence in dealing with this family and, with the whole problem of arson by public assistance recipients generally. It was only late in 1976 that the HRA tightened its procedures for disaster allowances in case of fire. By that time the landlords of unprofitable buildings had picked up the arson act.

Arson was more profitable for the landlords than for the tenants. Insurance payments were much more than the actual commercial value of the buildings which were torched. There was little risk to those landlords who usually lived far away from Bushwick and who could hire a local firesetter for a paltry \$50. The FAIR Plan paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars in fire insurance settlements. However, because fire insurance payments are of a private contractual nature, it is difficult to get actual figures on the claims for the Bushwick area.

The FAIR Plan concept was born of rioting and destruction. During the 1967 riots property damage and looting called attention to the desperate need for changes in property insurance contracts. Some inner city properties had had trouble placing fire insurance since the end of World War II, but in '67 the situation became critical.

Representatives of the insurance business met with Washington officials to look for a

way to provide adequate insurance protection in a climate dominated by civil unrest. They created a federal riot reinsurance program in which the private companies would provide fire insurance to any insurable risk regardless of location. If this proved too demanding of the private sector, then — with the approval of the state legislatures — pools or joint underwriting associations were to be formed to provide coverage.

By October of 1968 New York's state legislature had passed enabling legislation. The New York Insurance Department approved operating procedures, and three days later the New York FAIR Plan was in full-time operation.

For the speculator, abandonment was never as lucrative as arson. It was nonetheless a favored, last-ditch form of exploitation. Run the building down, make no repairs, pay no taxes, collect the welfare rents until the very end — then walk away.

There are, of course, reasons other than those discussed for arson. Revenge is usually listed as the motive for arson that is not based on greed. Some teenagers burn buildings just for kicks. Others torch buildings to satisfy pathological subconscious quirks, and there are the exhibitionists who want to be heroes, who like fire engines and the excitement generated by a good blaze. Arson for profit, however, is the motivation for most deliberately set fires.

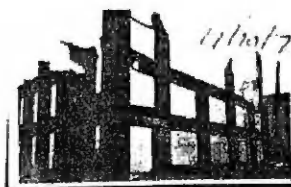
Today, on a national basis, arson accounts for more than 40 per cent of all property losses from fire. In Bushwick the figure approaches 80 per cent. Nationwide, over four-billion dollars worth of property is destroyed annually. Although these fires are set for many reasons, the primary motive is to collect on the fire insurance.

Because so many dollars are being paid out for crooked fire losses, insurance premiums go up to spread the risk. The price of fire insurance reflects the underwriters' costs of paying for the losses caused by arson and the expenses in handling them, and the hapless ratepayer gets the inflated bill.

Recent legislative changes in New York make arson even more attractive for the mortgage

holder. Under the new law the city does not get the first crack at the fire insurance money to cover back taxes; now, the banks, money lenders, and the purchase money mortgage holders are paid off first. The law now places the city behind the banks and the lenders for purposes of collecting from the proceeds of the fire insurance. This new law does not differentiate between accidental blazes and arson. The mortgage

holders get their monies before anybody else, and if there is anything left over, the city can collect its unpaid real estate taxes, another monumental deficit the poor taxpayer must assume. It raises the question of how much of a beating the voter and non-voter must absorb before he exercises his right to vote out of office the officials that permit this and other outrages to continue.



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PART FOUR

The "Burning of Bushwick" has not happened overnight. The area has been burning for seven years, at an average of 120 structural fires per month. Fire Department statistics indicate that Bushwick had 1,086 structural fires in 1970 and 1,198 structural fires in 1971. The fire-frequency rate is about the same now as it was in 1970. Nothing has slowed the pace of Bushwick's cremation.

One of the main reasons for the speed with which fires spread through the blocks of frame housing in Bushwick is the common cockloft problem. There are no dividers in these cocklofts, located directly under the roofs; consequently they operate as vacuums in the case of fire, causing the flames to spread through the entire row of houses. This situation has caused great tragedy in Bushwick. There are many reported cases of families smothered by smoke inhalation (asphyxiation) while sleeping peacefully four doors away from the scene of the fire.

Brooklyn Polytechnical Institute has received a federal grant to conduct experimentation on methods of fireproofing woodframe houses with common

cocklofts. Professional Paul DeCicco, who is directing the experiment, has developed highly reliable non-combustible materials that can greatly reduce the dangers of fire in these houses. A building can be effectively treated for approximately \$1,000. Professor DeCicco's experiment in Bushwick has been successful, but the patient is beyond recovery. There are relatively few woodframe houses left in Bushwick! The successful techniques that have been developed can and should be used now in other areas with substantially solid woodframe housing.

The Blackout and ensuing fires which occurred in July finally

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caused the New York City Administration to recognize that a major portion of Bushwick was indeed being consumed by flames.

However, despite this burning peril, Bushwick's Arson Task Force was not formally established until August 1977 by the Beame Administration and funded through the Mayor's office. It is a joint effort of Fire Marshals and Police Officers combining to help curb the fires in Bushwick. While it is still too early to measure the overall effectiveness of the Task Force, there has not as yet been a significant decrease in the number of fires in the area.

The Force has, to date, made over 100 arrests for arson. Most of these cases are still pending, but the convictions seem to be bogged down in a maze of legal procedures and lack of evidence. The future of the Arson Task Force will now become subject to the discretion of the Koch Administration.

Between 1970 and 1977, the city administration apparently chose not to heed the warning signals of increasing arson incidents. Bushwick was obviously burning, but just as obviously being ignored. Fiscal problems became the "cover-all" answer when cutbacks were initiated in essential services such as Fire, Police and Sanitation. Yet moneys were being spent by the New York City Department of Social Services at a staggering rate.

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A report compiled in February 1977 by the New York State Department of Audit and Control — Office of Welfare Inspector General stated, "Since its inception in 1971 the Office of Welfare Inspector General has received a significant number of complaints ... concerning non-payment of rent by New York City public assistance recipients;" this despite the fact that the sum of \$531.6 million is allocated annually for welfare rents.

The OWIG continued their report, citing instances of "arson and property damage committed by public assistance recipients motivated by a desire to collect funds for moving and furniture replacement, or to secure other housing. Until July 28, 1976, NYCDSS had no mechanism to

formally report recipients suspected of arson to the proper authorities. As of August 16, 1976 the NYCDSS personnel designated to receive such complaints did not know what to do when these complaints were received."

Millions of dollars have been squandered over the years by the NYCDSS for an assortment of reasons, including: failure to establish proper controls to monitor the return of security deposits on rentals, excesses in the mean rent paid by public assistance recipients, and increased instances of the welfare population becoming extremely mobile, leaving behind a trail of unpaid rents and incurring extra moving costs to the NYCDSS.

In 1966 Bushwick was denied selection to the City-Federal

Model Cities Program. This effectively precluded Federal money for the area. One reason Bushwick failed to get Model Cities status was that the 1960 census used in the determination showed the area to be mostly white and middle class. That situation had changed drastically by 1966, and some long-time residents now suspect that the remaining whites, who dominated the local Democratic party apparatus, feared that Model Cities status would destroy their property values. The Brooklyn Democratic machine, meanwhile, helped make Bushwick minorities politically voiceless by drawing local representative districts that made Bushwick a minority in each district. Squabbling over the few available government dollars and jobs by local minority leaders only made matters worse.

All of this meant that the only new housing in Bushwick in the last fifty years is a senior citizen development on Palmetto Street between Evergreen and Central Avenues. This project, which contains 103 units, was built by a private developer for the City Housing Authority, and completed in 1976. It has not proved very attractive to senior citizens, and is not yet fully occupied. Its location, far from transportation, churches, shopping and other amenities, is obviously problematic. It is difficult to see the rationale of the City's Planning Department in choosing the Palmetto Street location for senior citizen housing. It raises the suspicion that the site was selected more because of political connections than for its nearness to the essential services so badly needed by the elderly.

City Planning has also given its blessing to the proposed 14-story senior citizen tower in the City housing complex on the P60 site, located between Wilson and Central Avenues, and between Menahan and Linden Streets. The project is also linked with Federal funding. Unfortunately, the Federal and City Planners still subscribe to the out-dated policy of stacking people in towers.

Experts in the field have reported that land-use is not the problem any longer in certain areas of Bushwick; they have been leveled by flames, and only await the bulldozer to clear away the debris. However, because the bureaucratic wheels have turned so slowly, the community is being

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forced to accept the "high-rise towers" or forfeit Federal assistance completely. A re-evaluation is sorely needed.

Future housing plans for Bushwick will be carefully scrutinized by the Community Planning Board, whose powers have been greatly increased under the revised City Charter. Nonetheless, unless the ills of the past are heeded, there is the danger that the rebuilding of Bushwick will be either a boondoggle for the speculators and unscrupulous developers, or a bureaucratic nightmare created by the City of New York.

At the moment, there are seven active and inactive housing development corporations in the

Bushwick area. As moneys become available for rehabilitation and reconstruction, it is likely that there will be a proliferation of housing groups, ready and willing to cash in on the future of Bushwick. The development of housing for the poor could become the next big "rip-off" in Bushwick. The vultures are gathering from within and, especially from outside Bushwick, ready to pick the bones of a dying community. The Housing Authority, City Planning and HDA roll on forever, and will survive the demise of Bushwick.

Even while Bushwick burned, some of its residents made positive and constructive contributions to the community. The overall picture was a bleak one, but there were bright spots, which prove the indomitability of

the human spirit. The Salvation Army built a prize-winning, multi-purpose building and a chapel on Bushwick Avenue near Cornelia Street. The buildings, functional in design and architectural gems, were constructed in the early 1970's under the dynamic direction of Captain Alfred Jones, who was the Army's executive officer in Bushwick up to June of this year.

In 1972, New Life Corporation sponsored the construction of a well-designed Day Care Center on Woodbine Street near Knickerbocker Avenue. This structure has been featured in a number of architectural journals as an outstanding example of creative design for educational purposes.

There were many other day care centers built in Bushwick while the neighborhood burned. Except for the Salvation Army and New Life, all the other centers were built by private landlords who had obtained long-term leases from the City. These leases have been the subject of many investigations, and the City's practices in day care leasing have been denounced by the State Comptroller as irresponsible, patronage ridden and fiscally unsound. Needless to say, there was little planning as to the location of these centers,

and little emphasis on design or architectural features.

The federal government began to provide anti-poverty money to Bushwick in 1968. By and large, the war on poverty in Bushwick has been a failure although funding has continued at the rate of about a million dollars a year since 1969.

Bushwick Community Corporation is the official agency of the anti-poverty effort in the area. The corporation is among the more respectable of its kind in the city, but has had its share of fiscal and administrative woes over the years. It was under receivership for approximately two years and has lost a number of contracts.

The social action picture in Bushwick is not all negative. There have been some successes in spite of the odds. Hermandad Hispana de Bushwick, an Hispanic fraternal association, purchased the Knights of Columbus building on Central Avenue in 1969. The Hermandad (Brotherhood) has been a stable and representative group since its inception. It has sponsored a variety of social service and youth programs, and has established a solid reputation for social responsibility and civic involvement.

In the northern section of Bush-

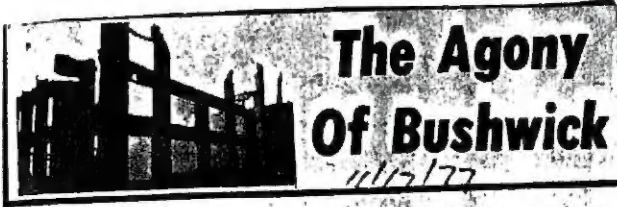
wick, the elderly — predominantly Italian residents — have been blessed with the services of the Ridgewood-Bushwick Senior Center. The center is known city-wide for the range and depth of its programming, and is a unique example of a city-sponsored service that has been successful in Bushwick. The center's success is due in great measure to the leadership qualities of Director Vito Lopez, who is widely recognized as an expert in services for the elderly. Lopez has managed to develop a team of dedicated and competent civil servants who do not conform at all to the stereotype of the uncaring, bureaucratic city employee.

The Bushwick churches have also been speaking out against the deprivation and human misery that have engulfed Bushwick in the last decade. Through the Better Living Ecumenical Parish Association and its housing development corporation, Better Living Ecumenical Realty, Inc., the clergy and churches of Bushwick have fought for decent housing in the area. Recently, the Association has rehabilitated a number of woodframe houses on Harman Street. Also, a new ministerial alliance, led by Rev. Roy Brown of Pilgrim Baptist Church (the former Fourteen Holy Martyrs Catholic Parish) has raised its voice on behalf of Bushwick's people.

There are, of course, countless individuals in Bushwick fighting the good fight, but the odds are seemingly against them.

As one cynical onlooker noted when U.S. Secretary of Commerce Juanita Kreps appeared recently at the ceremonies on the site of the old Rheingold breweries for the formal presentation of the \$5 million grant awarded by the government for the redevelopment of that area into a mall, "It's like Marie Antoinette. The poor people around here are starving, and they're being offered a piece of cake."

Hope, however, is the keystone to Bushwick's rebirth — and the fact that there is hope augurs well for the community's future.



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PART FIVE

In a poignant letter addressed to President Carter and signed by Kathleen Casuso of Harman Street, Bushwick is described as "on the brink of disaster." The letter, printed in the Sunday News of November 13, contains a list of Bushwick's immediate needs. The priorities listed by Mrs. Casuso are almost a carbon copy of the recommendations of the New York City Master Plan, published in 1969.

Bushwick needs everything from housing to hope. Nobody disagrees on the needs of Bushwick. Nobody knows how to help, or more cynically, nobody wants to.

The agony of Bushwick is dramatized day in and day out in the lives that are lost in its eternal flames. The latest victim, an eight-year-old boy, Duane Thomas, died in a fire at 247 Grove Street early on Tuesday morning.

This fire, which seems to have been deliberately set, leaves only two occupied houses in the row of

solid brick buildings on the block between Wilson and Knickerbocker Aves. The Arson Squad, Fire Marshals, Police Department, newspapers, and television cameras were all on the scene Tuesday morning to find out what madness caused this latest fatality in Bushwick's roll of innocent fire victims.

Last week New York Secretary of State Mario Cuomo announced that the State of New York was awarding a consultant contract to a not-for-profit organization for a commercial revitalization study

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of Bushwick, the South Bronx and East Harlem. The total project will cost \$257,000 and it is designed to help businessmen keep down rents, increase security and obtain adequate insurance.

It would be better news if the moneys were to go directly to Bushwick and not to another "study" of the area. Fires are not prevented by master plans or by scholarly treatises, and Bushwick has had its fill of plans, treatises and fires.

There has been a spate of studies on Bushwick during the last decade, all of which have pointed out the desperation of a beleaguered community. Many doctors of Philosophy and masters of Science have earned their academic laurels analyzing, dissecting, and commenting on the woeful conditions of this ideal laboratory for graduate school degree candidates. The net result of all the studies, reports and "theses" cannot be measured in dollars flowing into Bushwick — there have been none.

Aside from the Anti-Poverty allocations, virtually no other federal program moneys have been designated for Bushwick. We have already commented on the failures of the Anti-Poverty effort in Bushwick, a classic case of "maximum feasible misunderstanding."

A recent study on the Senior

Citizen — Juvenile Escort Program, which was piloted in Bushwick and other communities, characterizes the program as a failure. So what's new? The fact that the program did not work does not mean that it will be discontinued.

Bushwick has been studied to death. Thanks to widespread press coverage, there was no reason to call for a study of Bushwick's chronic unemployment rate after the July blackout and looting. A look at the juvenile delinquency rates for the 83rd precinct would convince the most hardened sceptic that youth unemployment in Bushwick is a desperate problem. No in-depth analysis was required.

What has been the official response? For the youth, there was the Summer Employment Program which provided almost 2,000 make-work jobs for youngsters during July and August. This program alleviates tension in the streets for the summer months, but does not provide valid work experience for the youths who are, for the most part, unskilled and barely literate.

The CETA Program was designed to provide jobs for the poor and hard core unemployed in minority inner city areas. Bushwick would seem to qualify, but nary a job program for Bushwick's poor had been submitted before the blackout.

After the Blackout, the City of New York entertained a proposal for 150 jobs in Bushwick. The

program, sponsored by Hermandad Hispana de Bushwick, would have provided local social service agencies with community workers. Many of the positions proposed were found ineligible for CETA's moneys, but a total of 32 jobs was approved by the City Administrators of the program. These jobs may become a reality in 1978, but it has been impossible to speed up the processing of the Bushwick application. Not the press, not publicity nor pyromania can short circuit the bureaucratic breadline for the powerless.

Turning back to the Studies ... In 1974, the Bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University published an interim

report on "Neighborhood Variation — The Implications for Administrative Decentralization: An Analysis of Subcommunities in Brooklyn Community Planning District 4." We are advised on the cover sheet that the project was funded by "a grant from the Research applied to National Needs Directorate of the National Sciences Foundation — Social Systems and Human Resources Division." If one is not overawed by the prefatory information, the study is worthy of perusal.

The survey showed that two out of every three respondents wanted to move out of Bushwick. Most people felt that safety in the streets was the number one community problem. Fear of gangs, drug addicts and street crime were considered the

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greatest problems in all sections of Bushwick. Interestingly, neither arson nor educational failure were listed as major problems when this survey was conducted, in late 1973. Certainly fear of fire would be a major dread today.

Youth gang activity has declined in Bushwick since 1974, although there still is a high incidence of juvenile crime. Youth crime today has become individualized; it is no longer a group activity.

Hard drugs are not as prevalent as they used to be; drug-related crimes have decreased. There is, however, a resurgence in the abuse of soft drugs like marijuana and cough medicine in the last six months, particularly among younger teenagers.

There has been good police work by the men of the 83rd precinct in the fight against drugs in Bushwick. Four uniformed cops, working in an unmarked car, have established a city-wide reputation for the number and quality of their narcotics-related arrests. Sergeant Fred Schroeder heads the Conditions Team of Patrolmen Medina, Knightly and Ruppert. The team, widely respected by

lawbreakers all over the precinct, has an unusually high rate of convictions, perhaps as high as 90%. These men handle emergency conditions throughout Bushwick, and have won the admiration of its citizenry for their effectiveness and dedication to duty.

Despite the good news on the war on crime in Bushwick, the city-wide picture on juvenile crime is bleak.

The juvenile justice system in New York City is in total disarray; it has broken down completely. The Vocational Foundation, Inc., in their report: "Our Turn to Listen, A White Paper on Unemployment, Education and Crime Based on Extensive Interviews with New York City Teenage Dropouts," calls the system a scandal, and a travesty of law and order. Youths under 16 hardly ever go to jail in New York no matter how serious the crime, be it robbery, rape or murder. When teenagers are incarcerated they are usually mingled with hard-core criminals and receive little in the way of rehabilitation, counseling or therapy.

Most experts agree, however, that the underlying problem with inner city juvenile delinquency is the lack of job opportunities. Most of them are high school dropouts, with no marketable job skills.

For many of them, crime becomes a means of survival. The official unemployment rate for minority youth is 44%; it is higher in Bushwick. Statistics are not readily available for Bushwick, but estimates run as high as 80%. Federal programs have failed to solve the problem, nationwide, but Bushwick did not

even have the opportunity to participate in this failure. It has not benefitted directly from the Job Training Programs or the Manpower Development and Training Act.

The Columbia survey tells us that Black and Hispanic homeowners are the least likely to want to leave the area. Low-income residents, particularly the single parents with children, are most likely to want to move. These findings should be taken into account as housing plans for Bushwick are developed. Stability, it would seem, would be enhanced by home ownership, not by public housing; but Bushwick is getting public housing — a 14 story tower for openers.

It is always easier to look back at the past than to make predictions for the future. Predictions, however, are the occupational hazards of the social scientist. The survey makes a guarded prediction that "Bushwick is on its way to becoming an increasingly Black older area with proportionately fewer households with children." Bushwick has, in point of fact, become increasingly Hispanic since 1973.

Other observations, however, are as valid now as they were at the time of the study. There is little organizational affiliation in Bushwick, and few channels of communication to its residents. It is not a homogeneous community; there is no strong local governmental presence maintaining contact with the disparate elements of the community. Not even the churches afford a good channel of communication — less than 30 per cent of Bushwick's population is church-affiliated.

We have mentioned some of the groups that have attempted to overcome the general discontent and cynicism that are rampant in Bushwick. These and other groups, including churches and block associations, are positive forces that can counteract the alienation of Bushwick's residents and help them strengthen their neighborhood ties.

Primary ties are the warp and woof of neighborhood stability. The presence of family and friends in the same area creates the sense of belonging which is essential to liking one's neighborhood.

We all need to belong to some place, to have roots that identify us with a particular clan, tribe or group. Neighborhoods cannot survive without this sense of participation and identification. Some might call this "community," others "ethnicity." Call it what you want, but the identification of oneself in space, time and history is the antidote to alienation and rootlessness.

Tribalism is a constant pitfall for those who are interested in promoting ethnic awareness. Of course, ethnic pride can degenerate into chauvinism, parochialism and insularism. Nonetheless, Bushwick needs a little parochialism, a little insularism. It needs people who are not ashamed to say that they come from Bushwick, for whom the word 'Bushwick' is not a term of opprobrium or embarrassment.

Can one be proud of Bushwick? If it is not possible, then there is no hope for Bushwick or any other community in which people have no roots, interest or identification.

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The Agony Of Bushwick

There have been many reports, news stories, and articles on the problems of Bushwick. This series, compiled by Carl E. Clemens, James J. Kelly, and Maureen Walther, is an endeavor to examine the causes of, and possible solutions to, the present situation. Much of the material for this series is drawn from the files gathered by the Ridgewood Times during its seventy years of community service.

PART SIX

When the white middle-class members of the Bushwick community started clearing out in the late 50's and early 60's, their exodus was, in great part, encouraged and fostered by the insidious ploys of block-busters.

How easy it was to play upon racial fears. The City of New York, under the auspices of the Department of Social Services, saw to that. By using Bushwick as a "dumping ground" for welfare cases, the long-time residents were placed in an almost panic situation.

One homeowner, James B. Carroll, who settled in Bushwick in 1960, recalls, "It was a beautiful area. There were one or two families living in three-family houses. When I moved in, there was only one other black family on the block. I moved on a Thursday. By the end of the next week, I'd say two-thirds of the whites had left."

Carroll, active in community affairs for years, says the real estate operators first scared whites from their homes. In late

night phone calls, whites were asked if their daughters were home yet, and weren't they afraid they might be raped? This was usually enough to send white families fleeing, block after block.

The speculator could then buy their homes for as little as \$8,000 each, and resell them to black families for over \$20,000. Real estate dealers looted Bushwick in other ways in the 1960's. Some divided three-family homes into crowded, 12-family dwellings. They attracted Southern Blacks, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who were migrating to New York in the 60's, often with larger families.

As conditions became intolerable, many houses were

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Bushwick

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simply abandoned. Those houses became the playground of young vandals and arsonists, some paid by landlords to "torch" vacant buildings to collect insurance money. In this way, whole blocks fell like dominoes.

For the small landlords who owned one or two buildings and conscientiously attempted to maintain his premises, loss was almost inevitable. He was usually a resident of the area who only moved out as a last resort in the face of neighborhood changes. He did not want welfare tenants at first, because of the difficulty in collecting rent and preventing damage to his property. Failing to find other tenants, he finally

accepted the Social Service clients. It soon became too late to sell his home — its value had plummeted and mortgage money had dried up. After two or three years, he was forced to abandon his building. If the building burned down, he usually did not collect large payments from insurance companies, or did not even carry insurance because of the prohibitive premiums required in the Bushwick area.

The speculator blockbuster, on the other hand, owned a large number of buildings in Bushwick and was usually able to garner a substantial profit on his real estate dealings. Rent control was sometimes a problem, but it was never unsurmountable. It was always possible to get the low-renter, usually the elderly/ white resident, out — this opened the

way for the welfare tenant who usually did not worry about rent control ceilings.

Even when the tenants did not pay the rent promptly or completely — a common occurrence — the speculator could still make a profit. He decreased services, and collected whatever rent he could. When he decided to abandon the property, he neglected to pay taxes and collected rents as long as anyone remained in the building. In some instances, as soon as the building burned down, the landlord was able to collect much more than the value of the property in fire insurance payments.

Many of these real estate operators are based in the Ridgewood-Bushwick area, and are still operating.

Most of these buildings were

multiple dwellings; the differences between owner-operated buildings and those managed by real estate operators are best dramatized by comparing fire damage on certain blocks in the Bushwick area over the past six years.

On Greene Ave. between Wilson and Central Aves; Manahan St. between Central and Evergreen; and Harmon St. between Central and Evergreen, an estimated total of over \$500,000 has been disbursed in insurance payments in this time. Solid stock brick buildings were just as quickly consumed by fire as were frame houses.

Conversely, Chauncey St. between Bushwick and Evergreen Aves., primarily owner-occupied, has had a minimum of fires over the same period.

Those fires which occurred are interpreted as "usual" in a high-density area.

This comparison doesn't even touch on the blocks that are still being ravaged by fire. A look at Grove St. between Knickerbocker and Wilson Aves., another block of brick dwellings, is frightening evidence of the arson syndrome which has become a way of life in Bushwick.

In a feeble attempt to take the profit out of arson, a new bill was signed into effect this week. It states that "when a property with unpaid taxes burns down, a special lien can be placed on the property against fire insurance proceeds for the amount of outstanding tax arrears due the City." In itself the bill was laudable, but then the clause was also included which stipulated that mortgage holders and banks get first crack at the insurance money, with the City third in line. In relation to fires in Bushwick, this means that many of the real estate operators who supplied their own purchase money will have first claim on the insurance money. The speculator who saw that his building was on the way down, abandoned it, let the taxes slide, then torched it for the insurance money, will be able to repeat the same pattern and be well within the law while accomplishing a financial coup.

Demolition notices have been issued for over 100 buildings in Bushwick for this month. Whole blocks are again scheduled to be razed ... to be replaced by what? If we believe everything we read, a 330-apartment complex is planned by the Housing Authority.

The Daily News would have us believe, in their recent editorial, "Bully for Bushwick", that Bushwick's enlightened leadership is welcoming the Housing Authority into its area. The News deserves the kudos of the Bushwick population for putting it in the limelight and has continually focused public attention on an almost forgotten enclave in Brooklyn. Bully for the News.

The Housing Authority was so impressed by the eager corporation of elective officials and community board members that Bushwick is about to become the

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beneficiary of a total allocation of 680 units of public housing. The Community Board, however, has not approved these plans, which have not yet been discussed in detail with the Housing Authority.

The Daily News editorially suggested to other neighborhoods that they follow Bushwick's lead in welcoming the City Housing Authority. Before any community accepts this municipal advice, they should come to Bushwick and see for themselves. However, should any subscribe to the philosophy of concentrating 600 poor families in public housing in the center of its community, without provisions for commercial, recreational or other supportive services; if they believe in the philosophy of awarding construction contracts without public bids to politically connected developers; if they believe that the elderly should be housed in 14-story towers, in the center of a complex of 600 public housing units; if they believe in the infallibility of city agencies, and their patience does not wane after a decade, then Bully for them — they have found a friend in the New York City Housing Authority.

City and Federal agencies are force feeding the Bushwick community with the threat of "take this, or nothing." Being ten years behind the times was one of the things that caused these agencies to overlook Bushwick and contribute to its downfall. Now the same theory is still being applied. It's about time these agencies begin to deal with the immediate problem and not "drawing-board statistics" which are outdated before the ink is dry.

Henry Gaven of the Office of Economic Development stated at a recent meeting on the arson and other related problems in Bushwick that, "this tower is utterly obsolete. Land is no longer the problem in Bushwick. Towers are costly to maintain and dehumanizing to the occupants. Whatever is built in Bushwick should be no higher than three stories." Gaven also noted that, "the main ingredient needed in any housing is equity on the part of the tenants, whether it be 'sweat' or monetary. People must have a vested interest in their residence or else indifference begins the deterioration cycle over again."

The struggle for decency, stability, and normalcy in Bushwick is an unrewarding and seemingly endless task. We have seen the forces allied against these values grow fat at Bushwick's expense, though many slumlords deny that the rape of Bushwick has been financially rewarding. The only real loser has been Bushwick.

Thanksgiving celebrations will be held this week in Bushwick the same as around the rest of the country. Who are the Pilgrims beating a thoroughfare for freedom across the wilderness of Bushwick this Thanksgiving Day?

Gone are the days of Bushwick when residents would flock to the fashionable Trommers Restaurant for Thanksgiving Day Dinner, followed by a parade along Bushwick Avenue. Children and adults would have sport by dressing up as ragamuffins and ringing doorbells asking, "anything for Thanksgiving?" Now that parts of the area sport a ragamuffin countenance the powers that be, answer the question, "anything for Thanksgiving" with a deafening NO.



The Agony Of Bushwick

There have been many reports, news stories, and articles on the problems of Bushwick. This series, compiled by Carl E. Clemens, James J. Kelly, and Maureen Walther, is an endeavor to examine the causes of, and possible solutions to, the present situation. Much of the material for this series is drawn from the files gathered by the Ridgewood Times during its seventy years of community service.

PART SEVEN

The agony of Bushwick can be a prelude to the throes of death or the pain of rebirth for a once-flourishing community. Bushwick's experience can be replicated in any neighborhood in New York City, or it can be a lesson for those communities threatened by a similar cataclysm.

Communities east of Bushwick are in the direct path of the tidal wave of apathy and exploitation that has already engulfed so much of the northern section of Brooklyn. Are the flames of Bushwick licking at the heels of Ridgewood? The two communities are historically and geographically linked; if Ridgewood falls, it will

precipitate a domino effect which will spread to Glendale, Maspeth and Middle Village.

The most immediate danger is a short-sightedness which fails to see beyond the imminent threat to one's own block, neighborhood, or bailiwick. Remember, Bushwick — isolated from its neighbors to the east — was virtually ignored by the residents of Queens County. Ridgewood cannot afford a similar isolation, if it is to avoid a similar fate. Ridgewood's future is Glendale's obligation, Maspeth's concern, and Middle Village's hope.

Neighborhood deterioration, decline, and decay are not inevitable natural disasters.

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Deterioration can be prevented, decay can be remedied, decline can be arrested. What is the magic formula? Who has the prescription? There is no instant cure; there are ingredients that can combine to produce the vitality that spells health for a community. Ridgewood has all the raw materials.

Growth is the antidote to decay. Ridgewood and its adjoining communities cannot remain static; they cannot always look to their past. The character and soul of a neighborhood can survive change. Change is inevitable, and Ridgewood is changing.

Last Sunday, NBC-TV featured

a program, "New York's German-American Heritage." Since the Ridgewood community is synonymous with all things Germanic, the show depicted the ethnic traits that have traditionally been linked with this area: hard work, thrift, independence, cleanliness, and a strong sense of tradition.

While many of these virtues are still intact in Ridgewood, the winds of change are blowing. Bushwick was caught in a time-lag of ten years which spelled destruction for that community. Unless the Ridgewood community realizes the changes that are occurring at the present, the same thing will happen here.

Ridgewood has experienced a new influx of European immigrants in the past ten years. Italian (both from Europe and

from war-torn Bushwick), Yugoslav, and Rumanian newcomers are the most numerous and visible of these. Ridgewood has always been an immigrant community; its diversity of cultures, customs, and lifestyles is a microcosm of the American experience. The melting pot doesn't really dissolve the differences; they must be seen as strengths, and have to be respected and appreciated. We live in an era of heightened ethnic awareness, and we must build a community based on the consciousness of this awareness.

The quality of housing is crucial to a community. Decent housing is one of Ridgewood's attractive features. Its housing stock is predominately brick as opposed to frame, and essentially

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sound. Bushwick had a much larger proportion of frame houses than Ridgewood.

Housing standards must be maintained. Home ownership must be encouraged. Mortgages must be made more readily available. Fire insurance rates must not be allowed to accelerate. Disinvestment by banks and fire insurance underwriters must be prevented. High-risk fire insurance is the "kiss of death" for any community.

Absentee landlords must be monitored closely to prevent welfare dumping or racial steering. In a free enterprise society, landlords are of course entitled to make a fair profit. There must be limits, however, to profiteering from housing. The community has an interest in preventing blockbusting, panic

selling and exploitation.

Strong block association and civic organizations need the support of residents. Observing the trends on your own block is the best barometer for a community. However, observation is useless if the proper mechanisms are not working to effectively deal with these trends. The solution for deterioration lies in the hands and hearts of those ordinary people who have helped maintain the character of Ridgewood.

Ridgewood also has the advantage of having an economic base, which was lacking in the Bushwick area. Jobs are available here, and industrial development such as the Industrial Area designed for Maspeth, must be encouraged. The knitting mill industry is thriving in Ridgewood, with over 200 mills employing many residents of the area. Interestingly enough, many of the newly-arrived Yugoslav and Rumanian residents are fast becoming the backbone of this industry. The City and its maze-like tax system must be made aware of the need to encourage these life-support economic systems in the community.

Ridgewood needs an infusion of social services and Federal programs. It needs the services to deal with the problems of its elderly, its poor, its unemployed. These Federal programs should be geared to foster commercial revitalization of Myrtle Avenue and other business thoroughfares, to prevent business and housing decay, to facilitate home ownership, to promote industrial development.

For those persons who consider Federal intervention the death knell of community pride and personal initiative, consider Bushwick. Nothing was done to prevent, ward off, or anticipate its destruction. The City, State and Federal governments should have been able to provide the cure, but their ineffectual leadership seemed to hasten the demise of Bushwick. Infection spreads unless checked, and an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Self reliance has been the badge of honor of Ridgewood residents. This value cannot be gainsaid, but can sometimes lead to isolation. The problems of neighborhood change are national in scale. The Welfare question is a national issue; unemployment, discrimination, and crime are not local in scope.

Ridgewood cannot face these problems alone; their solution demands support from the government agencies which are supported with our tax dollars. While these proposed programs are not the panacea for problems, their advantages as well as their

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disadvantages must be openly discussed within the community by its leaders and residents alike. The local Planning Board could sponsor Town Meetings in which the pros and cons are presented.

The Housing Preservation and Development Agency of New York City could extend the services of its Bushwick office at 300 Wyckoff Avenue to include the Ridgewood area. This office is responsible for code enforcement and compiling up-to-date information on housing in the area it covers. Through the computerized information banks that it develops, HPDA can provide immediate information on violations, tax delinquencies,

and ownership and management of local housing.

There are those who contend that such agencies tend to strangle a community. Unfortunately, these agencies have always been brought into an area too late to be effective, as was the case in Bushwick. Perhaps, with some vision, they can be a boon to a community which is tottering on the brink. Under the guidance of concerned citizenry, their resources can be harnessed for the good of a community, instead of merely acting as a recorder of disaster.

A Neighborhood Preservation Program funded with Federal moneys could be developed and set up in Ridgewood. The purposes of the program should include promotion of home ownership through mortgage

assistance, renovation and rehabilitation, abandonment prevention, and assistance to tenants and landlords in utilization of available housing subsidy programs.

At present, the Greater Ridgewood Restoration Corporation is instituting a program designed at co-op renewal for multiple dwellings in the area. This is a private not-for-profit organization, and should be encouraged, as it provides an alternative method for dealing with new lifestyles, and allowing an equity among tenants, making part ownership a new concept in the area.

Opening of a Social Security Office for the convenience of Ridgewood's many elderly residents is necessary. This area has one of the greatest propor-

tions of elderly residents, and the least amount of services for them, in the City of New York. The fact that the postal zone of the Greater Ridgewood area is hooked up to the Brooklyn Postal Department makes it necessary for these elderly residents to travel great distances in order to obtain necessary services. Medical services for the elderly are almost nil, except from private resources. Housing for their needs is non-existent. These considerations must be addressed.

A local educational committee should be established, including parochial as well as public school representatives, to develop educational guidelines and suggestions for all community schools. Multi-lingual and cultural education is an issue that should be explored. Day care centers for children of working mothers should be seriously considered.

Within the framework of the City Charter Revision, Community Boards were formed. Ridgewood was unique in having one of the first viable Community Boards. It is comprised of energetic and conscientious citizens, but it must begin to include representatives of recent immigration in order to receive feedback from this fast-growing segment of the community. Community Board 5 must set priorities within the boundaries it encompasses. If the immediate threat to the community is looming at the Brooklyn borderline, then the Board must focus its attention there. With foresight, the rest of the area will benefit.

Cooperative effort is necessary between Board 4 of Bushwick and Board 5 of Greater Ridgewood. Bushwick's rebirth is a key part of Ridgewood's survival. The weaknesses of the governmental agencies that helped grease the slide for Bushwick can be avoided if they are understood. Who can give a better lesson than those who have experienced the

trauma of the monumental foul-ups?

The Board must form committees to monitor the warning trends of the community: welfare influx; crime escalation; fire statistics of a structural or suspicious nature; school trends in decreased enrollment and lowered reading scores. These signs were the harbingers of Bushwick's destruction. They did not have the advantage of the newly chartered Community Boards, Ridgewood does.

Over the years, the Greater Ridgewood area has been politically divided, sub-divided, apportioned, and re-apportioned; through it all, it has remained a stalwart area. It has voted many fine representatives into public office. However, absentee public officials are useless, and must not be tolerated. City agencies must be made answerable to the community-at-large. The commitment must be total and not just lip service.

If steps are not taken, and taken soon, the result is certain... the abomination of desolation. It happened in Bushwick; it can happen in Ridgewood.

Across the street from where Schwaben Hall once stood is the Doughboy Monument, erected in memory of World War I servicemen. Years ago, residents jokingly claimed that his fist was raised in anger against the isolationism of the German community which thrived in Bushwick. His anger still lingers, but one can only assume it is now directed toward those who destroyed the community. If Ridgewood does not survive the threat of destruction, the monument should be turned around and its anger directed at those who were warned but did not care enough to maintain their homes and community.



7/27/78 R.T.

Will The Mistakes Of Bushwick

TEXT BY CARL E. CLEMENS, JAMES J. KELLY

Be Corrected Or Repeated?

AND MAUREEN WALTHERS

A Year Later

Bushwick burned that much is obvious to the naked eye. The complicated and carefully concealed reasons why it burned are only just beginning to emerge. In our award-winning series, "The Agony of Bushwick," we dealt with the causes of, and possible solutions to, the present situation. Continuing investigation into the Bushwick problem has provided further insights into the reasons for its decay and destruction.

Although the burning was ten years in progress, no one except the victims of the firestorm seemed to notice. The City Fathers chose to ignore what was happening. Local politicians were uncharacteristically silent through the conflagration. Neighboring communities like Ridgewood, Maspeth, Glendale, and Middle Village looked away from the billows of black smoke, and ignored the influx of immigrants from Bushwick. When asked why these people had moved, they answered, "the neighborhood was chang-

ing"; the truth was, "the neighborhood was burning". The bureaucrats in the City administration, who have failed to address the complexities of urban living for the past twenty years, gloss over Bushwick's destruction as a natural phenomenon and therefore beyond their control. Nothing could be further from the truth. Bushwick was destroyed by gross mismanagement, criminal negligence, and political chicanery of the worst kind, as the most flagrant abuses were perpetrated by the City of New York under the cloak of the "fiscal crunch".

Consistent reductions in city services—housing code enforcement, sanitation, police and fire protection—precipitated the events whose effects stand as stark evidence today. Illegal subdivision of small houses, a large number of absentee landlords, unscrupulous blockbusting tactics, and a sharp increase in welfare tenants added up to a potentially dangerous situation.

In 1969, the City Planning Commission noted that Bushwick, which had some of the oldest housing stock in the City, was experiencing increased fire incidence. The additional workload of structural fires caused the Fire Department unions to demand extra manpower and equipment. New units were opened in and around Bushwick, and the fire rate declined. Had the Fire Department continued along these lines, the cremation of Bushwick might have been avoided.

At the same time, however, the Lindsay administration engaged the Rand Institute as consultants, in an effort to cut costs in City finances. The Rand Institute working within the Fire Department introduced a series of cuts and the first permanent relocation and eliminations of fire companies in the City occurred in 1972. This carried over into Bushwick, and decreased services continued on a downward trend through 1976.

"Planned Shrinkage"

The Mayor's office and the Planning Commission also began applying the theory of "planned shrinkage" to neighborhoods. The concept is simple, but deadly. Communities are categorized by their desirability. Those considered less viable than others by City administrators receive a lesser proportion of services.

As the Bushwick population grew in density, causing greater need for these services, they were systematically reduced. As the service declined, the fire hazard rose proportionately. Decreased maintenance of buildings, coupled with increased rubbish pile-ups, triggered the climate of combustion which exploded in 1977.

The Rand Institute policy of attempting to supply more fire protection with less equipment and manpower has proven fatal to both lives and property. The City has depleted the number of firefighters in action from 12,500 to the present 8,500; thirty-three companies have been disbanded altogether. Nearly 400 persons have perished in fires in neighborhoods formerly covered by these disbanded companies, and the City has lost over \$300 million each year in assessed tax valuation, due to fire damage and spreading blight. The City estimates a monetary savings of \$2 million yearly by using Rand Institute methods; with savings like these, is it any wonder that the City is constantly on the verge of bankruptcy?

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the agony of Bushwick remained a well-kept secret. It took two major catastrophes last year to catapult Bushwick into the

limelight: the Blackout on July 13 with the looting and arson which ensued, and the ten-alarm blaze on July 18 which destroyed twenty buildings, including landmark Schwaben Hall. By this time, fire companies city-wide were so overwhelmed by both total alarms and real fires that over the same Fourth of July weekend, more than 500 alarms had not even been answered in Brooklyn.

Suddenly the misery of Bushwick became a hot news item. Politicians flocked to the charred ruins with a new bag of half-answers. Additional Fire Marshals and an Arson Task Force were sent into the area, but not one additional engine or ladder company backed them up.

Now, a year later, the fire rate has abated somewhat. It is not yet under control, however, and this respite should be used to add to the hard-pressed work-force. The Uniformed Firefighters Association is once again calling for a restoration of manpower. Richard Vizzini, UFA president, has issued a demand for increased manpower and more companies.

Bushwick and South Bronx were sacrificed at the altar of mismanagement. How many more neighborhoods must be destroyed before the erroneous judgements of the Rand Institute and the City of New York are rectified? Ridgewood borders Bushwick, and the Brooklyn-Queens county line is not covered with asbestos. Statistics show that the fire line is moving through Bushwick and heading toward Ridgewood.

The path has been prepared by the same set of circumstances which paved the way for the destruction of Bushwick: illegal subdivision of small houses, a large number of absentee landlords, unscrupulous blockbusting tactics, and a sharp increase in welfare tenants. There has been a consistent decrease in sanitation services, and housing code enforcement in the Ridgewood area. Our fire companies are being relocated night and day, and our coverage is at a lower level than ever before.

The surest sign of the inadequacy of our fire coverage is the extension of high-risk fire insurance into the Greater Ridgewood area, due to redlining by the private sector. As we saw in Bushwick, insurance on a building is often

dropped because premiums for high-risk insurance under the State-mandated Fair plan—the only alternative to commercial insurance—are astronomical. This leads to abandonment, and ultimately the destruction of many buildings through arson.

The time to stop the spread of fire infection is right now. If Ridgewood is to be made fire-safe, the community must demand that fire protection be increased in Bushwick. The City recently tested over four thousand men for openings in the Fire Department; only 234 slots are being made available. This does not even cover the normal attrition rate in the Department, much less provide residents with adequate fire protection.

A concerned citizenry should demand that the work force and equipment be returned to a normal and safe level of fire protection. Is it too much to expect that the present administration will have the courage to admit that fire protection in the City is dangerously low, and take the steps necessary to reverse the trend? The savings of tax revenue on buildings now being destroyed would more than cover the cost of adequate fire service. Talk about penny wise and pound foolish; this should be apparent even to those of low mentality.

Bushwick's demise has opened a fertile field for studies of every kind. Sociologists, urbanologists, and a horde of students seeking original material for Masters' theses have descended upon the ruins to find reasons which can explain the death of a once vibrant community. We will present an in-depth study of some of the findings which have emerged from this post-mortem next week.

Broken Promises

The agony of Bushwick was exposed to world view in the aftermath of the Blackout of 1977—the first anniversary of which was celebrated last week; yes, celebrated along the looted length of Broadway. There is precious little to rejoice about as we review the rhetoric, the promises, and the plans that were spewed out by the politicians and the bureaucrats during the past years.

On a weed-grown, garbage-littered lot in the core of Bushwick, the emptiness proclaims the plight of Bushwick—P.60—a dream deferred. Ten years of broken promises.

The admittedly outdated high-rise complex is held out to Bushwick residents as the only hope for the redevelopment of the area, but construction deadlines come and go. The Housing Preservation and Development Agency is now reduced to repetitive "absolutelys" to characterize its latest deadline. — January 1979. The Housing Authority cannot even now predict with precision how the project will be financed.

Not only is Bushwick destined to become the location for the Housing Authority's high-rise project—but because of the Authority's commitment to Bushwick, the area will not receive any construction moneys for private development. HPDA has given the Housing Authority an exclusive on Bushwick. The head of the Planning Commission admits that HPDA opposes any new housing for Bushwick other than that proposed by the Housing Authority.

The broken promises are not only confined to housing. Bushwick has been swindled for the past fifteen years. Schools which were necessary years ago to handle the increased population were finally built, but by the time of completion, the population had shifted, and the schools stand under-utilized. The area is still being victimized. For example, the Juvenile Justice Rehabilitation Program funded by the City and the State has been withdrawn from the Bushwick area. Not for mismanagement of monies, not for any failure on the part of the sponsor, but because of bureaucratic bungling at both City and State levels. Bushwick's poverty program is in trouble and a new Head Start program proposed for the area is being cut back by the City. The list of cutbacks is lengthening, but the city insists that Bushwick has a high priority.

Summer jobs for youngsters were disproportionately meted out to Bushwick because of its helplessness, and Ridgewood is facing a similar situation. No Ridgewood agency received any allocation for summer youth jobs.

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Apparently the City Fathers feel that Ridgewood does not have economically disadvantaged youths in the area. It was also interesting that the applications gave the youths a choice of their primary language and was available in English, Spanish, French, Yiddish and Chinese. No applications were available in German, Italian, Yugo-Slavian or Romanian, the predominant languages of our communities.

Time For Action

Bushwick has become a powerless community because of its pervasive poverty. It desperately needs dramatic action if it is to survive as a habitable zone in the wasteland of urban decay. Its survival, not its preservation, is the issue today. Ridgewood is the new battleground for neighborhood preservation, but Ridgewood cannot be preserved if Bushwick does not survive. Before the inevitable paralysis of neighborhood deterioration takes hold in Ridgewood, there must be a joint Ridgewood-Bushwick assault on the cancer of decay which, even if unwittingly, is nonetheless effectively propagated by the mindless, senseless policies of governmental agencies.

Ridgewood is historically linked to Bushwick, but is geographically united to Glendale, Maspeth and Middle Village by Community Board 5. Whatever affects one portion of the neighborhood will reverberate throughout the whole area. Action must be taken immediately to solidify the community. Support for programs which are preparing a comprehensive policy of preservation is absolute. Demands for adequate city services in police, fire, and housing sanitation must be backed with constructive programs that fully utilize the combined efforts of the citizenry.

This is an election year and the political promises are as profuse as one would expect. An aware voter can determine if the aspirant to office is qualified to represent this area in an intelligent manner. Bushwick's leadership capitulated under City administration policies that were detrimental to the community. Ridgewood, Glendale, Maspeth and Middle Village must present a community consciousness which can inspire the kind of civic involvement which will turn back the tide.

The people of Bushwick, like the characters in the tragic comedy "Waiting for Godot" by Beckett, vacillate between hope and despair. They have been asking "When will help come?" for over ten years. If the people of the Greater Ridgewood community will not learn from the mistakes of Bushwick, they are dooming themselves to inevitable repetition.

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